THE AGE OF CONSPIRACISM

It's a religion that blends faith and doubt about everything from Flight 800 to Oklahoma City

BY JONATHAN ALTER

WHAT IF THEY'RE all connected? The Kennedy and King assassinations, plus Vincent Foster's "suicide"; gulf war syndrome, not to mention the injection of AIDS and crack into the inner city; Korean Airlines Flight 007, Pan Am Flight 103 and, of course, TWA Flight 800, which we have now learned, thanks to Pierre Salinger, was "absolutely" brought down by a missile from a U.S. Navy ship.

I've neglected dozens of other conspiracies, as I'll no doubt be reminded on the Internet. The cover-up of alien abductions. The cover-up of Bill Clinton's murders of his Arkansas enemies. The cover-up of the October Surprise.

MICHEL LIPCHITZ—AP

Bombs away: *Like most conspiracy theorists, Salinger exaggerates honest doubt into 'evidence' of wrongdoing*

The post-cold-war battle lines are finally being drawn. In place of socialism versus capitalism, it's conspiratorial versus non-conspiratorial: people who think most bad things can be explained by bad people working together in brilliant secrecy versus people who think the natural human condition is to talk too much and screw things up. In case you can't tell, I'm in the latter camp.

Call it conspiracism, a religion that blends faith and doubt. At the end of an exhausting century, it's a comfortable way to make sense of a messy world. One-stop shopping for every explanation. Things don't just fall apart; the center doesn't just mysteriously fail to hold. Somebody *makes* them fall apart, and pointing the finger is easier than living with complexity. The skeptic as true believer; the "cover-up" as all-purpose Satan. It's good for self-esteem, too. Makes you seem hardheaded, savvy, skeptical. Journalists tend to be the agnostics of the conspiratorial faith, suspicious enough to think the worst but too familiar with the natural chaos of life to fully subscribe. Meanwhile, linked to "the establishment," we have become targets ourselves.

The new volume and velocity of communication have spread the faith. But, as the communists learned, it's also much harder to keep secrets in the Information Age. Any decent-size conspiracy demands the silence of at least dozens of people. Today's conspirators have to worry about not just the rare whistle-blower but the everyday disgruntled, litigious, fax-happy American, itching for a lawsuit against the boss or a few bucks from a tabloid. Odds of there being no one like that on Salinger's missile-firing cruiser: close to zero.

Where it gets tricky is that even paranoids have real enemies, and even conspiracy theories can occasionally turn out to be true. This keeps the debunkers on their toes. Why did the Pentagon lose those gulf war records about exposure to chemical weapons? If navy fighters forced a commercial jet to take evasive action off the coast of New Jersey last month, couldn't that TWA flight have plausibly been brought down by friendly fire? The problem is that questions—sometimes legitimate questions—too often masquerade as *evidence* of wrongdoing. This happens every day in Washington scandal reporting.

Salinger went further. He didn't say that a missile attack should be viewed as a possibility (which is, incidentally, the FBI view); he said, on the basis of crackpot interpretation of radar, that it was a certainty, that his analysis in Paris Match "completely confirms" the friendly-fire theory. It does nothing of the kind. But every time the FBI and mainstream media discredit the story, it's enhanced in the eyes of conspiracy freaks.

And they're becoming a formidable and ferocious constituency. Elaine Showalter is a Princeton professor with a forthcoming book, "Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media," that argues such ailments as gulf war syndrome and chronic fatigue syndrome are largely cultural phenomena related to war neurosis (common after all wars) or everyday domestic stress. Her book hasn't even been published, but the vitriolic reaction is already forcing her to change her e-mail address. "These theories are the other side of science," she says. "People have come to think there are magic-bullet answers to the complexities of modern life."

While conspiracy theories are ancient phenomena, the U.S. government has replaced Masons, Catholics, Jews and communists as the scapegoat of choice. Exhibit A: Timothy McVeigh, whose defense is that the government lies and covers up. In 1963, when Salinger was President Kennedy's press secretary, a Gallup poll showed that 74 percent of Americans would "trust the government to do the right thing all or most of the time." Today the figure is 24 percent. The irony is that we trusted the government more when we had less reason to trust it, when it was routinely lying (Vietnam), killing secretly (CIA plots against foreign leaders) and covering up real crimes (Watergate). As a partial result of those abuses, today we trust it less when it is, by all evidence, more benign and bumbling. Waco—like so much of what the government touches—was about incompetence, not malevolence.

All governments lie, but ours lied more when Salinger was on the inside. Maybe that's what motivates him to believe not just this tale about TWA 800 but also outlandish stories about how George Bush orchestrated the invasion of Kuwait. Or maybe, as some friends say, he can't resist the lucrative lecture dates that await him in Europe, where they love anti-American conspiracy theories. With his ABC News experience, perhaps Pierre Salinger's next job could be cohosting—with Oliver Stone—a 24-hour Conspiracy Network. Permanent guest: Ross Perot.